

Harvard's Ash Center Announces 124 Bright Ideas in Government

Cambridge, Mass. – February 18, 2015 – The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, recognized today 124 innovative government programs as part of the 2015 Bright Ideas program. This year's cohort includes programs from all levels of government—school districts; county, city, state, and federal agencies; as well as public-private partnerships—that are at the forefront in creative response to issues familiar to many parts of the country, including revitalizing local economies, disaster response and preparedness, community policing, and outdated infrastructure.

“The Bright Ideas program demonstrates that often seemingly intractable problems can be creatively and capably tackled by small groups of dedicated, civic-minded individuals,” said Stephen Goldsmith, director of the Innovations in American Government Program at the Ash Center. “As exemplified by this year's Bright Ideas, making government work better doesn't always require massive reforms and huge budgets. Indeed, we are seeing that, in many ways, an emphasis on efficiency and adaptability can have further-reaching effects than large-scale reforms.”

This is the fourth cohort recognized through the Bright Ideas program, an initiative of the broader Innovations in American Government Awards program. For consideration as a Bright Idea, programs must currently be in operation or in the process of launching and have sufficient operational resources and must be administered by one or more governmental entities; nonprofit, private sector, and union initiatives are eligible if operating in partnership with a governmental organization. Bright Ideas are showcased on the Ash Center's [Government Innovators Network](#), an online platform for practitioners and policymakers to share innovative public policy solutions. Read more about the Bright Ideas [here](#).

Improving Criminal Justice and Public Safety with Data

Many Bright Ideas programs focus on using data analytics to improve policing, criminal justice, and public safety. The state of Connecticut's Crash Data Repository centralizes information on motor vehicle crashes to allow the public and the transportation-safety community to access state and local police data that is timely, accurate, and uniform. In New York City, the Risk Based Inspection System allows the city's Fire Department to prioritize building inspections based on risk, as quantified through past inspection information and incidents of fire, reducing the number of injuries and death to the public and first responders. The DNA Hit Integration Program from San Diego County, California, provides prosecutors with real-time access to information on DNA hits related to their current caseload, making both prosecution and exoneration more efficient and timely. In Wisconsin State, the Wrong Way Driver

Alert System gathers information on wrong-way driving and assists law enforcement with providing timely response while targeting problem areas and mitigating reoccurrence.

Reaching Underserved and Underrepresented Populations

Several Bright Ideas programs focus on expanding education and career development for populations traditionally left behind by the system, including people with special needs and economically disadvantaged children and adults. The Mentoring Program and Youth Directors Council from the city of Miami Beach, Florida, provide a safe space for at-risk youth to spend their after-school and weekend hours, offering access to study resources and SAT-prep along with career-search training and community mentors. Also in Florida, the city of Hialeah's Special Population Initiative uses community spaces to provide alternative education for individuals with disabilities, including children with severe autism, and helps relieve families of some of the high cost of care for those with special needs. In Pearce County, Washington, the Block Play program uses libraries as a space for at-risk children to develop early-learning skills through guided block play, and trains parents to guide this play at home, focusing on developing literacy and STEM skills.

Other programs focus on community development and cultural preservation. In the state of Hawaii, the Le Fetuao Samoan Language Center engages Samoan youth in the community and teaches them to respect their culture while creating investment in their families and larger communities. Finally, the Tribal Best Practices program from the state of Oregon's Addictions and Mental Health Division Tribal Liaison helps adapt state-mandated, evidence-based practices to meet cultural and traditional standards of the Native American populations, developing best practices that address statewide goals without unnecessarily burdening these unique communities with distinct histories.

Public Participation and Civic Engagement

Among this year's Bright Ideas, there was a trend in programs focused on engaging citizens in government processes that affect their lives, seeking their input and ideas to ensure that government is meeting the needs of those it serves. Faced with a growing population of residents of Asian origin with low levels of participation in local government, the Increase Asian Residents' Civic Participation program from Lexington, Massachusetts, focuses on identifying barriers to participation and reaching out to Asian residents to encourage greater involvement in government, including seeking candidates from those populations to run for local office. Similarly, in Portland, Oregon, the Community Engagement Liaison Initiative identifies civic-minded individuals from vulnerable and underserved neighborhoods and provides them with training in collaboration and advocacy skills, creating a link between their communities and the city government. The Citizen Survey Data for Performance program from Kansas City, Missouri, uses survey data of community feedback on city departments and their operations at their monthly KCStat meetings, where departments share their progress with the mayor and answer questions from the public who interact via livestream, social media, and in-person attendance. Finally, the state's Oregon Solution's Network fosters communications between government and citizens groups while encouraging collaboration between state agencies to ensure the public's priorities and those of not-for-profit and business-sector partners have a say in shaping government action.

Using Technology to Make Government Work for People

Many Bright Ideas use technology to increase efficiency and improve service for constituents. I-Jury: Online Juror Impaneling from Travis County, Texas, allows summonsed jurors to answer qualifying questions, screen for exemptions, and request deferrals using an online system, preventing unnecessary courtroom visits and reducing work absences and life disruptions. In Shawnee County, Kansas, residents planning visits to the Motor Vehicle office can register for a spot in line using their smartphone or computer, and receive alerts as their turn approaches to avoid long and frustrating lobby waits. The city of Chicago, Illinois, takes the relationship between citizens and technology one step further with its Civic User Testing Group, a set of Chicago residents who test civic apps and help make software that improves the quality of life for residents through beta testing and providing feedback to developers.

Cultivating Innovation

In the spirit of the Bright Ideas program, several initiatives selected for recognition are themselves fostering innovation in government, such as the Employee Innovation Challenge of the city of Hamilton in Ohio, a contest that encourages city employees to submit ideas and work across departments to improve processes and address local challenges, increasing employee engagement. At the North Carolina Innovation Lab, state employees, students, and private partners collaborate to test new technology systems before making substantial investments. And, in Washington State, the Innovation Exemption policies remove procurement rules for purchases intended to introduce new technologies and ideas to state government.

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About the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation

The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence in governance and strengthens democratic institutions worldwide. Through its research, education, international programs, and government innovations awards, the Center fosters creative and effective government problem solving and serves as a catalyst for addressing many of the most pressing needs of the world's citizens. For more information, visit www.ash.harvard.edu.